

RECAPITULATIONS

The Sin of Scientism: Reponse to Clark

Maarten Boudry

There is one thing you can be absolutely sure of when you defend the claim that modern science has rendered the existence of the supernatural implausible and that science and religion are therefore in conflict: you will be accused of a sin called “scientism.” What exactly it is that you’re being accused of is not always clear. It certainly isn’t clear in Kelly James Clark’s reply (Clark 2015) to my review–essay (Boudry 2015) of his book *Religion and the Sciences of Origins* (Clark 2014). Apart from a vague gesture toward “logical positivism,” another bogeyman in modern philosophy, Clark never quite explains what it is that I’m guilty of. (By the way, the logical positivists were suspicious of all metaphysics, and would never venture the claim that science has disproven the existence of God. They would rather claim that the word “God” is meaningless.)

There is no agreed-upon definition of the nebulous concept of “scientism,” except that it is a term of abuse meaning something like “pushing science too far.” Take Clark’s description of scientism as “the view that science is applicable, perhaps uniquely, to every domain of human inquiry. ... Whatever lies outside the domain of science is rejected.” The problem is that the significance of “scientism”, thus defined, depends on your precise definition of science. Is history a part of “science” or not? I don’t lean one way or the other. If you adopt a narrow definition of science that excludes history, no sensible person is a proponent of “scientism.” If you construe science broadly enough, encompassing all legitimate domains of inquiry based on reason and evidence, many sensible people would be.

The issue of scientism is thus a diversion. The argument in my essay was that religion encroaches upon the territory of “science” (meaning, among others, evolutionary biology, ancient history, cosmology, and so on), by making factual claims about reality. Nothing in this argument commits me to the view that “science”—however construed—is the only acceptable or valid or rational mode of discourse. The proper demarcation of “science” is merely a semantic distraction, a territorial quarrel about how we denote certain types of knowledge (see Boudry 2013). Clark tries to make space for religion by pointing to other truths that “lie outside the domain of science” (mathematics, logic, literary criticism, and so on), but the fact is that none of these conflicts with science in the way that religion does.

Let’s deal with this conflict, then. In his book, Clark argues that theism is “not a scientific hypothesis” because it was not arrived at by way of controlled observation and careful hypothesizing. But that, I argued, is to conflate psychological origin and epistemic status. No matter what its psychological or historical origins, theism amounts to a factual hypothesis about the world with empirical consequences. In his response, Clark ignores my response and plays on the same equivocation: “one’s initial and even continuing warrant for belief in

God need not (and probably did not) come from its success in explanation or prediction.” Rather, such warrant comes from “experiences of God, the testimony of someone who had an experience of God, or reading a divinely inspired text.” Hence, God is not a scientific hypothesis.

This is really no better than saying that homeopathy is not in conflict with science because Samuel Hahnemann, its originator, did not use randomized double-blind trials and relied exclusively on anecdotal evidence. The parallel is exact: like homeopathy, theism may have originated from and may be sustained by wholly unscientific sources (revelation or inner feeling, according to Clark), but it has empirical consequences nonetheless that put it on a collision course with science. As I stressed in my review, the medieval Doctrine of the Two Books, which Clark uses to reconcile science and religion, actually confirms the conflict view, as the Book of Nature has over the ages devoured the Book of Scripture. Instead of dealing with these crucial points, Clark (again) expounds Alvin Plantinga’s theory about “properly basic beliefs” at length, which tries to put belief in an omnipotent deity in the same ballpark as belief in an external world, as not in need of any evidence (actually, we have overwhelming evidence for the latter, not for the former).

At the end of his response, Clarke assures us that he “enthusiastically endorse[s] contemporary science.” Good; we’re on the same side, then. After that, he adds that “versions of theism, those which impinge upon well-established science, need to be reexamined and, in some cases, even rejected.” Perfect. But why, then, does Clark take seriously Plantinga’s *sensus divinitatis*, a kind of supernatural brain antenna receiving knowledge of the divine, for which there is not a shred of scientific evidence? If Clark were serious about re-examining religious views in the light of science, wouldn’t the whole of theism end up on the scrapheap?

REFERENCES

- Boudry M. 2013. Loki’s wager and Laudan’s error: On genuine and territorial demarcation. In: Pigliucci M, Boudry M, editors. *Philosophy of Pseudoscience: Reconsidering the Demarcation Problem*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. p 79–98. .
- Boudry M. 2015. The relentless retreat: Kelly James Clark’s *Religion and the Sciences of Origins*. *Reports of the National Center for Science Education* 35(4):3.1–3.6.
- Clark KJ. 2014. *Religion and the Sciences of Origins: Historical and Contemporary Discussions*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Clark KJ. 2015. Is theism a scientific hypothesis? Reply to Maarten Boudry. *Reports of the National Center for Science Education* 35(5):5.1–5.3.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maarten Boudry is a postdoctoral fellow of the Flemish Fund for Scientific Research (FWO) at Ghent University. In 2011, he defended his dissertation *Here Be Dragons: Exploring the Hinterland of Science*, on the epistemic structure of pseudoscience. He co-edited the volume *Philosophy of Pseudoscience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013) with Massimo Pigliucci, and wrote *De ongelovige Thomas heeft een punt (Doubting Thomas Has a Point)*, a popular book on critical thinking in Dutch (Antwerp: Houtekiet, 2011) with Johan Braeckman.

AUTHOR'S ADDRESS

Maarten Boudry
Ghent University Department of Philosophy & Moral Sciences
S-Pietersnieuwstraat 49, room 204
9000 Ghent
Belgium
maartenboudry@gmail.com



Copyright 2015 by Maarten Boudry; licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License. <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>